

A CLOSER LOOK AT:

JANUARY 2015

Sunnyside Farms



Sunnyside Farms is a new bright spot in the Detroit agricultural landscape. As one of nearly thirty growing spaces in the Brightmoor Farmway, Sunnyside Farms is part of a thriving movement that is turning around a neighborhood that had once seen forty years of decline. From a place that in 1999 the Detroit News described as "Blightmoor," this community on the northwest side of Detroit is seeing a renaissance, thanks to the efforts of groups like Neighbors Building Brightmoor, and the impact of new urban farms, like Sunnyside Farms, that have sprouted in the last five years.

Jennifer Rissman-Mergos and Sparrow Rissman started Sunnyside Farms in 2014. For Sparrow, a fourth-generation farmer, and Jennifer, who had a lifelong interest in growing since her days in 4-H, this two-acre farm is the realization of a dream. Raising three kids in the city, they were interested in building a healthy environment for their own family, but even more, they were concerned about the lack of local, accessible food options in their area where obesity, diabetes, and other poor health outcomes were so prevalent.



When the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service's Wayne County Local Food Initiative was announced in 2013, they were excited and realized that this opportunity for support through the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) could help advance their goals of playing a role in building a strong local food system. While they already had started farming, with beekeeping, chickens, and a large garden, the EQIP opportunity could help fund a hoophouse, allowing them to transition into year-round growing. They applied for the program, were accepted, and worked to expand their farm over the last year. After a first year of growing, Jennifer is proud of the results, saying that what they grow is the "best food we've ever tasted, and everyone in the neighborhood wants more."



The path to successful farming hasn't been an easy one. Not everyone in the local neighborhood was initially supportive of their effort, and they found local zoning and municipal permitting very difficult. Construction of the hoophouse was considered illegal in Brightmoor when they were first awarded the EQIP contract, and they found it frustrating that local and federal levels of government had very different views of the potential for urban agriculture in Detroit. Despite these challenges, Sparrow did admit, "If had all been legal, it wouldn't have been as much fun." By building strong relationships with local officials, and continuing to advocate for change, they finally were able to change local policies and to pave the way for other farming efforts to follow. While the political challenges took time, and limited their available growing season in 2014, Jennifer explained, "The EQIP program made this all possible. It pushed for local legislation change."

Despite the cold when this interview was conducted, the Rissmans are looking forward to the 2015 growing season. Their field of garlic is already planted, and several varieties of greens are lying dormant in the hoophouse, waiting for early spring's warmth. They are already prepping other starts that will be planted as soon as winter's worst is over, and they plan to continue with their other specialties: eggs, honey, berries, and sunflowers. Their business model is diverse, with plans for an orchard, a firewood operation, and an offer of travel accommodations at the farm through Airbnb. Sunnyside Farms is also clearly committed to sustainability, working to power operations with biodiesel and solar energy. They already operate a small Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) program and are working with other neighborhood farms to run a series of Farm-to-Table events throughout the growing season.



When asked what advice they would give to new farmers, Jennifer quickly replied, "Find a good support system, whether it is a partner, community, kids, or family. A farm is like a tiny, vulnerable seedling: With support it can grow and bear good fruit." Sparrow agreed, mentioning that the World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF), an international network of organic farming that shares practices and connects farmers, has been invaluable to their learning process. They also credit the other Brightmoor neighbors as instrumental in their work. Together, the farms and gardens linked through the Brightmoor Farmway are building relationships, educating their community, supporting each others' farming efforts, and creating a thriving local food system.



The Rissmans are, rightly, proud of what they've built at Sunnyside Farms and are excited by the tangible positive growth that they have seen. Jennifer said, "I feel like I was born to do this. There's nothing I'd rather do. It's being outside, feeding the healthiest food for my family in a way that is affordable, sustainable, and educational for my boys. I fit in this framework. There's a lot of healing that can come to broken communities through urban agriculture as more people get involved."



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